

# Jules de Balincourt

# NEW- YORK PRIMITIV- ISM

Text by Katya Tylevich  
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**Jules de Balincourt tells Katya Tylevich how he wouldn't mind leaving for an island in the tropics like Gauguin ('without the sexually transmitted diseases'), but Manhattan is also an island and this Paris-born and West-Coast-educated artist is what keeps the place as exotic (from stock brokering to bright colours and Japanese influences) as anything an Impressionist or a Symbolist could have dreamt of.**

The plumber rings the doorbell while I'm visiting Jules de Balincourt in his Bushwick studio. De Balincourt has been doing some work to the building, recently: he's finishing a mostly DIY renovation of his modern, industrial apartment upstairs, but some of the piping downstairs, where his in-progress artworks lean against white walls below tall ceilings, have been giving him trouble. From the corner of the studio, where I'm looking at de Balincourt's new works, I overhear a very – if you will – Brooklyn exchange. Plumber and artist don't see eye to eye on what needs to be done and for how much. As if to acknowledge my eavesdropping, one of de Balincourt's two cats leaps onto the chair in front of me. If all of this sounds like good stage blocking, things get even more Shakespearean once de Balincourt returns to our conversation, and we continue talking over the plumber's clicks and clangs in the background. The artist tells me about his first few years in New York, in the early 2000s, when he made a living delivering art to the likes of Jasper Johns and Philip Johnson. De Balincourt laughs about the experience, saying he was treated like 'a poorly regarded maid service'. Now he finds himself invited to the same homes he visited on his work route, but this time he's allowed to enter through the front gates. 'So nice to have you Jules,' he jokes. 'Would you like champagne or Pellegrino?'

Given his background, de Balincourt has experience with fluidity: moving from one culture to another, one art form to another, from place to place. Born in Paris, de Balincourt moved to the canyons of Los Angeles with his mother in 1982. He was ten years old at the time. By his late teenage years, he had fully embraced the idea of California as the Wild West – camping, hitchhiking, and even following the Grateful Dead on tour. He describes those experiences as

both extremely liberating and kind of pathetic. In the nineties, de Balincourt studied ceramics in San Francisco before moving to New York in 2000. There, he went to grad school at Hunter College, worked in a studio in Times Square, and caught his big break as a painter in 2003, when art dealer Zach Feuer offered him his first solo show at his gallery. De Balincourt calls that his 15 minutes of fame, though the minutes seem to be stretching upward a decade now. Does he think his work has changed in the process? I ask. De Balincourt says his work is always changing, just never in a 'drastic, overnight makeover' sense. An artist is lucky if he can make several B+ or A- works in a row, he tells me. But the reason to keep going is to make that one piece that 'shines a little more than the others'. No matter how many months or years it might take.

— *Moving to Los Angeles with your mother in 1982 must have been a formative experience, but how conscious were you of that at the time?*

Well, in the early eighties we were still in the pre-globalization era, where French kids looked like French kids and American kids looked like American kids. Today, everybody's a homogenized, pasteurized mishmash of GAP and Nike, but back then, I was going to American schools wearing sandals with little flower cut outs and corduroy shorts down to my knees. Meanwhile, everyone else was in Vans, tube socks and OP (Ocean Pacific, surf) shorts. At first, I could barely speak English, so for a year or two, I was the village idiot. This was also at the height of the early Reagan days, so anybody who wasn't an American was a communist. I remember a kid telling me that America had won the Vietnam War. So while it was a humiliating time, it was very interesting as well. Ultimately, I grew to love California: I un-





Human Form Divine, 2012, oil on panel, 244 x 244 cm



Dismounted, 2010, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 101.6 x 116.8 cm

derstood it as the Wild West, as free and liberating. It was good to get away from the history and weight of Europe, from tradition and family. Certainly, the California freak show had a big influence on me.

— *Does that influence extend to the art you make today?*

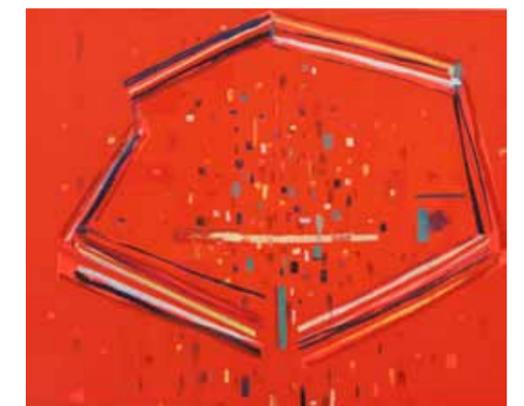
I think so. Especially the contradictions that everyone grows up with, not just in California, but in America: the extremes of right and left, obesity and anorexia, the most radical environmentalists and the most radical polluters.

— *What do you see as the contradictions and extremes in your work?*

I think there's a tension in my paintings between figuration and abstraction. I'm often tempted to bring in a figurative element, to insert a recognizable reality into my paintings, but that would be too easy, wouldn't it? The question is: How do you make an abstract painting that also communicates something outside of its own inner workings as an abstract painting? I'm not interested in lines and shapes alone. In patterns, colours or beauty. I'm interested in the way those things build up to the ideas I want to convey. I want to make abstract painting that has the energy of figurative work, and the same kind of anxiety, angst or complexity. Then again, even a figurative painting is an abstract painting. You might feel you recognize an image in a figurative work, but it's also made of abstract shapes and lines.

— *Do you agree when your work is referred to as 'Outsider Art'?*

Like anybody else, I would rather not be categorized and filed into any particular envelope. But maybe people use that term because of my simple, clunky style. I rarely paint from photography, and there is a simplicity of imagery in my work. But there are different ways to understand 'Outsider'. On the one hand, I'm not living somewhere in Appalachia, scribbling on a little pad in my mother's house. On the other, I don't feel at all connected to the *Artforum* art world. I never studied painting; I really only started doing it when I moved to New York. When I was studying ceramics in San Francisco with Viola Frey and Richard Shaw, there was a big clay scene around me. If I was painting at all in the nineties, it was on clay with ceramic pigments. But when I came



Floating Arena, 2012, Oil, oil stick and acrylic on panel, 61 x 51 cm

Off Base, 2012, Oil and acrylic on panel, 244 x 305 cm



Malpais (Bad Lands), 2008, oil on panel, 203.2 x 177.8 cm



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Out of the Darkness and Into the Light, 2009-2010, oil and acrylic on wood panel, 521 x 354.8 cm

to New York, I didn't have any of the materials for ceramics. Dealing with clay no longer made sense.

— *Did you move to New York with the specific intent to change as an artist?*

In California, five years can go by comfortably, and all you've done in that time is stare at the sun and drive your little car. There's something to be said for that kind of comfort, but I needed a jolt: I knew that if I was really going to pursue an art career, I needed to go to the belly of the beast. The first two years in New York were really difficult: I was delivering food, and then I worked as an art mover. Basically, I was a trucker for three years, delivering art to Jasper Johns or Philip Johnson's house. And because I saw all the behind-the-scenes dirt of the art world – the galleries, the collectors, the framers, the artists – I no longer thought of New York as an impenetrable fortress. Now, more than ten years later, I'm just jaded. [Laughs.] I'm thinking about leaving for the tropics.

— *Following in the footsteps of many venerable painters...*

Oh yeah, one day I could definitely see myself having the Gauguin experience – without the sexually transmitted diseases or young women.

— *Your experiences in California must count for something on the primitivism checklist.*

When I was 19, 20 years old, I was a young surfer, a hippie, living off the tailcoats of Grateful Dead concerts. I was making ceramic and goatskin drums and selling them at concerts; following the band on tour. It was a big thing, then: the Rainbow Gatherings, the Dead concerts. They had a whole village of people following them. And yeah, I had my pickup truck with a little bed. My girlfriend, friends and I would all drive down to Mexico and camp out anywhere we

wanted to. I would hitchhike from Seattle to L.A. That's crazy. I can't believe I did that, but we were just living out the idea of being young, romantic and free. There's something laughable about all of it, now. Post-hippie culture comes off as a bit pathetic that way.

— *What attracted you to it, in the first place?*

Similar social and political values. Travel. Community. And at the time, I guess, the parties.

— *Do those things translate into your current life as an artist in New York?*

When I first bought this building six years ago, I did try to run it as a community space. I hosted concerts and performances, film nights, yoga, a farmers' market. It was a shit-show that lasted for three years, and a monster that I had to keep feeding. It grew to be too much. Someone should have had an intervention, like, 'Jules, you're losing a lot of money. What are you doing? You're going to get in trouble.' And I did. I even got arrested once.

— *Yeah, but you never went on record to say what you were arrested for.*

Oh, it's a long story. It was nothing too serious. Basically, it was because I was running an illegal space, where people were dancing and drinking beers. I had to spend the night in jail. I actually tried to make the place legal after that, because I really did want to bring people together and share my good luck. But it was an uphill battle that I had to drop after a while.

— *Was it worth it?*

I have to keep myself stimulated, somehow. I can't be an artist who just paints all day.



Neither Day or Night, 2011, oil on panel, 243.8 x 335.3 cm



Think Globally, Act Locally, 2007, Oil on panel, 244 x 335 cm

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